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ABSTRACT

This brochure discusses the importance of keeping students from regressing during the summer months, explaining that most children forget important skills and knowledge that they do not use over the summer, and teachers often spend 4-8 weeks at the beginning of the school year re-teaching material from the previous year. How students spend their summer is important to their academic success. There are many fun and easy ways parents can help their children continue learning during the summer, including reading aloud to children and encouraging them to read aloud, discussing current events with children, encouraging children to watch educational television about science and nature, planting a garden, using maps of the neighborhood, visiting libraries and museums, and writing to local elected officials and newspaper editors about current issues. Many school districts and community organizations offer a variety summer programs that have different goals and teach different subjects. Parents need to examine the programs closely before selecting one. Summer learning activities can nurture children's natural curiosity to learn new concepts, skills, and information. Parents can help their children succeed in school and life by providing fun enrichment opportunities during the summer and throughout the school year. (SM)

ERIC Clearinghouse on Urban Education

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for parents, about parents

Making the Most of Summer Vacation for Elementary School Children

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Have you ever heard of a group of musicians who rehearsed every day from September through June, but then took a three-month summer vacation without practicing at all? Or of professional athletes who never exercised during the off-season? What would happen to their performance? What about children during summer vacation—does it make sense for them to stop learning once schools close?

Throughout the school year, students have many opportunities to learn and achieve. They read, write, and learn new vocabulary words. They work with each other to solve math problems and complete hands-on science projects. They use books, computers, films, and outings to explore new worlds and read about different people, places, cultures, and times. But during the summer, many children take a vacation from learning activities and practicing the skills they need to be successful. Instead of reading, they often watch television and play video games. If summer vacation lasted for only a week or two, this wouldn't be a problem. However, most American schools close for nearly three months during the summer. This long vacation can mean trouble for children's learning and achievement when they return to school in the fall.

The Effects of Summer Vacation on Learning

Nearly every child suffers from what is called *summer learning loss*. Children forget important skills and knowledge that they don't use over the summer. For example, students who take a holiday from reading during the summer score lower on tests at the end of their vacation than they did on the same reading tests at the beginning of the summer. In total, many students lose one to two months' worth of reading and math performance during the summer. Teachers often spend four to eight weeks at the beginning of each school year re-teaching material that students have forgotten over the summer.

While losing a few months' worth of achievement in one summer might not seem important, summer learning losses add up over many years and have a large impact on children's performance. On average, students who suffer from summer learning loss every year do not achieve nearly as well on standardized tests as students who experience summer learning gains. How students spend their time during the summer is important to their academic success.

Family Learning Activities

There are many fun and easy ways for parents to help their children continue learning during the summer. The best ways to support learning during the summer do not involve tutoring, textbooks, worksheets, and quizzes. Summer is an excellent time for informal education such as trips to museums, public libraries, and parks. Children should use their vacation from school to discover the joy of learning, reading, and writing about things that interest them. During the school year, parents help their children succeed in school by checking their homework, reading them bedtime stories, and limiting the amount of time they watch television and play video games. Children need similar academic support during the summer.

Parents don't need college degrees or even the ability to read, write, or speak English to support learning during the summer. All parents can involve their children in fun, everyday activities such as cooking a new recipe or shopping at a local supermarket. These activities can help students practice their math skills during the summer. Here are a few specific ideas for summer activities parents can use to support learning:

Reading and Writing

- Share the joy of books by reading aloud to your children every day, and having them read aloud to you.

- Let your children see you reading for pleasure.
- Subscribe to magazines and newspapers and discuss current events with your children.
- Praise your children for reading.
- Make weekly visits to the local public library and participate in special reading summer programs that most libraries offer.

Math and Science

- Encourage your children to watch educational television programs about science and nature. Ask them questions about what they watch. Try the experiments at home.
- Bake cookies to practice fractions and measuring ingredients, and make homemade ice cream and other foods to show them about the properties of salt, liquids and solids, and how to measure temperature.
- Visit a local park and observe different types of rocks, animals, insects, and leaves.
- Use an outdoor thermometer to track weather, make predictions, and observe patterns.
- Plant a garden to show how seeds develop into plants and how fertilizer and weather can affect growth.
- Participate in a local recycling program.
- Check out books from your local library that contain ideas for science experiments.

Social Studies

- Use events such as the Olympics to explore the cultures and customs of other countries.
- Make maps of your neighborhood and places you visit with your children.
- Interview older community members about their lives and the history of the neighborhood.
- Learn capitals, countries, and continents by playing games and taking virtual trips online.
- Take field trips to museums, botanical gardens, zoos, and local history sites.

- Write to local elected officials and newspaper editors about current issues.

Formal Summer Programs

Many school districts and community organizations offer a variety of summer programs that have different goals and teach different subjects. Though it would seem natural to assume that all summer programs would help prevent summer learning losses, little information exists on which formal programs are most helpful. When selecting a summer school program, parents should ask themselves the following questions:

- Does the program give my child daily opportunities to read and write?
- Do instructors teach academic subjects or focus solely on recreation?
- Will my child receive individual attention and be a part of small classes?
- Do staff members monitor student attendance and provide structured learning activities?
- How does the program involve parents?

Many of the larger summer programs that are offered in city school districts such as New York, Chicago, Boston, and Detroit are designed to help students learn material they didn't understand in class the year before and prepare for standardized tests. These programs often do not focus on preventing summer loss. They are usually available only to students who are at risk of being retained in grade. School districts often require students to attend these programs in order to advance to the next grade level in school. In some cases, these mandatory, remedial summer school programs do result in improved test scores for students. However, they are not designed to provide enrichment opportunities and prevent long-term summer learning loss for all young people.

Regardless of whether children participate in formal summer school programs, summer vacation is an ideal time for parents to continue their year-round effort to help their children learn and grow. Summer learning activities nurture children's natural curiosity to learn new concepts, skills, and information. All parents can help their children succeed in school and life by providing fun, enrichment opportunities during the summer and throughout the school year. Working together, communities and schools can ensure that no child ever takes a vacation from learning.

—**Matthew Boulay, Teachers College,
Columbia University,
and
Ronald Fairchild, Teach Baltimore**

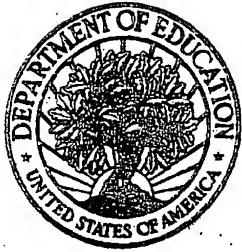
Additional copies of this parent guide, and a list of other published materials for parents and educators, are available from the ERIC Clearinghouse on Urban Education (ERIC/CUE) at Teachers College. These materials are also available on ERIC/CUE's web site:

<http://eric-web.tc.columbia.edu>

Another very good source of materials for parents is the National Parent Information Network (NPIN), which is jointly managed by ERIC/CUE and the ERIC Clearinghouse on Elementary and Early Childhood Education at the University of Illinois. NPIN and the clearinghouses are sponsored by the Office of Educational Research and Improvement of the U.S. Department of Education. NPIN's web site is:

<http://npin.org>

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